

Lessons to be learned from KC school struggles

OUR VIEWSTOO MANY SCHOOLS, TOO FEW KIDS

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BEFORE MAPS for Kids ever came up for a public vote in 2001, school and community leaders had no trouble agreeing on one point: Oklahoma City couldn't afford to end up like Kansas City, Mo.

By then, Kansas City was a cautionary tale for urban school districts. After a federal desegregation case, the state and school district went on a \$2 billion, decade-long spending spree beginning in the mid-1980s. What a shopping trip it was.

A 1998 report from the Cato Institute found that the district had higher per-pupil spending than hundreds of other large school districts. Teachers received raises. Class sizes shrunk. More than a dozen schools went up. One school had television and animation studios. Another had a robotics lab. Then there was the 25-acre wildlife sanctuary and an Olympic-sized swimming pool — complete with an underwater viewing space for visitors.

The lesson was clear: Money isn't the panacea for what ails public education. When MAPS for Kids planners were eyeing Kansas City, that district had a 30,000-student enrollment, 5,000 employees and a \$275 million budget. Nearly a decade later, enrollment stands at about 17,400, the district has 3,300 employees and the budget keeps shrinking. The biggest problem is student achievement hasn't improved.

Last week, a divided school board approved a plan to close 26 schools and eliminate about 700 jobs. Superintendent John Covington said the "right-sizing" plan will save about \$50 million for a district that simply has too many schools for too few students.

Why does this matter here? Kansas City came to mind in recent weeks with the release of a report that praised infrastructure improvements but was critical of the academic progress within Oklahoma City's schools in the years since MAPS for Kids passed. Oklahoma City also has some capacity concerns, with schools in south Oklahoma City brimming with students while others have small enrollments.

The Kansas City story also is instructional as the Oklahoma Education Association pushes a state question that would pour an additional \$850 million or more per year into public schools without any promise of additional reform or accountability. These are tough budget times for schools, and the next few years will be difficult. But it's naive to believe that more money — even lots of it — is *the* fix.

The Cato Institute's long-ago report pointed to several lessons worth considering here.

Politics made it hard to fire bad teachers and principals and hire good ones. Too much attention was focused on drawing back white students instead of focusing on the needs of inner-city minority students. A lack of teacher and principal evaluations kept good educators from being promoted. And the system rewarded failing schools.

Those points sound so familiar. Policymakers and taxpayers would do well to heed those lessons. This city and state still can't afford to repeat Kansas City's mistakes.

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